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ABSTRACT

The growing chasm between society's complex problems and what the systems can do to help is driving reform in all sectors. Just as schools alone cannot compensate for the disadvantage created by troubled homes and communities, welfare and social agencies cannot hold out a hopeful future to clients lacking employment abilities. Comprehensive problems call for comprehensive services to the whole person and community. Family crises and poverty conditions must be alleviated if children are to concentrate in the classroom; children must succeed in the classroom if they are to support themselves and avoid long-term dependency as adults. Demographics and financial reasons also support collaboration. "Joining Forces," a National Association of State Boards of Education report, has launched a national effort to help education and social services work together to aid children and families at risk. Areas for collaboration include health care, income support, family social services, tutorial and remedial help, before- and after-school care, improved parental literacy and involvement, linkage between employment and education, and attendance policies seeking to retain rather than exclude. Advice is provided for understanding the problem and building interagency collaboration. Examples of collaborative efforts in New Hampshire, Washington, D.C., Texas, and Michigan are summarized. Tips are provided for ensuring collaborative success that transcends special project status and attempts fundamental organizational change. (Nine references) (MLH)

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COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL SERVICES

By Lynn Balster Liontos

The growing chasm between society's complex problems and what the systems, as presently configured, can do to help is driving reform in all sectors. So says *Joining Forces*, a report by the National Association of State Boards of Education (Janet Levy 1989) calling for joint action. "Schools alone cannot compensate for the disadvantage created by troubled homes and troubled communities," states Levy. "Welfare and social services may momentarily mitigate a crisis, but cannot hold a hopeful future to those who lack abilities demanded by the job market." One of the key changes needed to make reform work, say many experts, is collaboration between education and human service agencies.

Why is collaboration mandatory?

"Using the schools to achieve racial balance, eliminate poverty, fight drug abuse, prevent pregnancy and reduce youth suicide is simply too much!" complains one educator (Dennis Rittenmeyer 1986). Over and over the *Joining Forces* staff heard the plea from both educators and human service workers, "We can't do it alone." The problems are simply too big and too complex.

Complex problems call for comprehensive services to the whole person and his or her community, says Lisbeth Schorr (Levy). Educators emphasize the importance of seeing the larger picture: That the child is part of a family, which is part of a community, and that they can't be separated. Nor can human services and education remain in separate categories. For one, they have overlapping administrative responsibilities and are mutually dependent on each other. "The goals that each system is setting for its own reform effort cannot be realized alone, but depend on complementary action by one or more sectors," says Levy. "Family crises and the conditions of poverty must be alleviated if children are able to concentrate in the classroom; children must succeed in the classroom if they are one day to support themselves and avoid long-term dependency."

Demographics also support collaboration, states Harold Hodgkinson (1989). For example, with metro areas crossing state lines, how do we deal with school districts that have allegiances to several states or cities? Or what about the link between education and crime? Eighty-two percent of America's prisoners are high school dropouts (Hodgkinson). Yet the cost of prisons is so astounding ($20,000 to maintain one prisoner for a year) that Hodgkinson says anything that keeps people out of prison, such as education, is an excellent long-term investment.

Finally, there are financial reasons. Hodgkinson doesn't see new funds for social programs forthcoming from government: "That being the case, we simply have to get more mileage out of the resources and organizations we now have." In fact, he stresses that we may be able to magnify the effectiveness of each dollar several times through interagency collaboration. For example, a dollar invested in Head Start saves you $7 in later services you don't need to provide (Hodgkinson). "Fully funding Head Start," he says, "would be the most cost effective way to reduce high school dropouts, welfare recipients, as well as astronomical jail costs."

On what issues should we be collaborating?

Joining Forces has launched a national effort to help education and human services work together to aid a targeted group: children and families at-risk. Of the children starting school in 1988, one in four was born into poverty, half a million were born to teen parents, and over half at some point will live with only one parent in households prone to poverty and stress (Levy). Add widespread substance abuse, inadequate health care, lack of affordable housing and you get families that often face many risks simultaneously, increasing the complexity of solutions.

Floyd Boschee (1989) also believes that if America is to develop a strong, competitive economy in an international market, quality public schooling will have to be provided to all children, including the disadvantaged.

The educational reform movement has generally not addressed the particular needs of disadvantaged students; in fact, it has made school success often harder for students already having difficulty.

Areas for collaboration, depending on age group, include health care, income support, social services for families, tutorial and remedial help, before- and after-school care, improved parental literacy and involvement, linkage between employment and education, and attendance policies that seek to retain rather than exclude.

How can we begin?

No one has all the answers, but here are ways to begin: (1) Study demographics, such as Hodgkinson's report, including demographics of your own community. (2) Go to joint conferences where structured dialogue between agencies is encouraged—or set up joint committee meetings, such as between education and health. (3) Make note of successful collaborative examples, both past and present.

(4) In the beginning, pick an issue to collaborate on that's not on anyone's specific turf, such as teen pregnancy. (5) Involve key officials for inspiration and organizational backing; involve all key stakeholders, such

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as staff who work directly with the children; include neutral parties who can smooth out rough spots. (6) Watch for "categorical drift"—that is, each agency working on its own in isolation.

(7) Encourage information-sharing among systems about children and families, and reward staff for working with others outside their own sector. (8) Stress prevention and early intervention; look for ways the school system can, in working with other agencies, strengthen families and communities.

(9) Use effective team-building for shared control and decision-making; good communication is vital. (10) Focus on process; remember that collaboration is a means, not an end. (11) Set realistic time-frames; establish common goals to be implemented across agencies, with accountability spelled out. (12) Be willing to commit the necessary resources: successful collaboration takes time and energy.

What has collaboration achieved to date?

Joining Forces collected information nationwide about collaborative programs. These efforts are useful to study because they inform us about what works and how to build a base for collaboration. Two of the most important achievements that state and local collaborations have shown, according to Levy, are improvements in the delivery of existing services and the opportunity to provide new kinds of service, particularly to high-risk adolescents and communities.

Training, for example, is a major focus in Rockingham County, New Hampshire, where elementary teachers are trained by the Division of Children and Youth to recognize early signs that a child is in trouble. Locating services so they're readily accessible is another way of improving connections. Washington, D.C.'s Housing and Community Development Department and the D.C. Public Schools, for instance, have opened study rooms at two public housing complexes; teachers report that, as a result, children are showing improved study skills and turning in homework more reliably.

As an example of new kinds of services, Texas' Communities in Schools Program brings social service staff into the school where they work intensively with students at risk of dropping out. The result? The program reports it keeps 90 percent of its students in school. On the other hand, the Kent County, Michigan, Department of Social Services provides funds for outreach workers who follow up on attendance problems in early elementary grades—with the result of improved attendance for 90 percent of first graders.

How can we ensure future collaborative success?

The first collaborative steps have been taken. Yet virtually no one is satisfied, says Levy, that collaboration has gone far enough. For one thing, many of the best examples aren't widely known and thus aren't frequently replicated. More importantly, even when successful programs are in place, the changes and lessons usually haven't been incorporated on a systemwide basis. Too often they're like "special projects"; substantive policy discussions and priority-setting across systems are rare.

Thus a broader view of collaboration is needed: "Collaboration must be not just a luxury set of ad hoc connections, but a core aspect of organizational thinking and individual thinking, reaching from the commitments made by top policymakers to the way individual teachers and social workers interact with children and families" (Levy). This requires fundamental systemic change—a restructuring of organizational configurations, policies, program content, training, financing, and management.

Can we do it? Certainly it means sacrificing (giving up turf and comfortable traditions, for one thing). But Schorr says the problems with families and children have emerged at the same time that twenty years of research have produced a critical mass of knowledge needed for taking action. We *do* know enough to help, she says: "The question is whether we are willing to bite the bullet and do it" (Levy).

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